



Temple Beth David

Welcoming the Stranger

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Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers
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I have many great Rosh Hashanah memories at my grandparents' home in Herkimer, N.Y. My aunts, uncles, and cousins all descended on this little town in upstate NY for a raucous celebration of the Jewish New Year. The services we went to were at my grandfather's conservative shul where RH morning services would last a good four hours. One could barely even follow the cantor's chant that seemed to drone on and on. You don't know how lucky you are at Temple Beth David. Once we survived the service, the best parts of the holiday were of course the glorious long meals. We would start with appetizers in the living room and then have a formal meal in the dining room. What was amazing was not just our family coming together for the Rosh Hashanah meals but all the other people my grandparents invited. This could be a newcomer to Herkimer or someone who didn't have a place to go. For my grandma Elsie, there was always room in her home and as any Jewish bubbe would do, there was always more than enough food to go around.

My father recalls stories of how Elsie's parents, his grandparents Sarah and Harry, even as impoverished new immigrants from Lithuania, would always invite people into their home. His mother told him that anyone wandering in Harry and Sarah's neighborhood knew they could always come in for meal. My grandmother, following in her parents' footsteps, on instinct would open up additional tables, put out extra chairs, to include not only friends but even a stranger or two. Both of my grandparents not only invited complete strangers for the holiday meals but even for a weekday meal. If someone was in town on business, he would end up at my grandparents' table. Elsie and Saul Myers lived the Jewish value of *Hachnasat Orchim*,

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welcoming the stranger. They were acting in a tradition that goes back thousands of years all the way back to our Biblical Abraham and Sarah.

In the Torah Genesis 18, Abraham is sitting in his tent on a very hot day. We learn in the previous parasha of how he had circumcised himself at the age of 99 along with the males of his household. Rabbinical commentators speculate that he was still in recovery when he sees three strange men walking towards him. Despite the heat, despite how his body felt, Abraham runs to greet them and invites them to rest. Rashi, one of the most famous medieval commentators, tells us that it was no coincidence that Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent. According to Rashi, Abraham purposely sat at the opening specifically looking to invite anyone into his home.¹ The Torah continues to describe how he offers the strangers water to bathe their feet and food to refresh them after their journey. Hastening to the tent, he asks Sarah to quickly gather choice flour and make some cakes. Then Abraham races to have a calf prepared for these strange men. As soon as the meal is prepared, Abraham waits on them under the tree as they ate. Wow! This is true hospitality. Offering complete strangers to come in and make a meal just for them. Abraham and Sarah, from this account, are associated with the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming the stranger.

Welcoming the stranger is not only about feeding someone a meal. It can mean looking out for those who are new or different; those who are at the outskirts of our community. The Torah tells us many, many times to remember that we were once strangers in the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy parasha re'eh states² “*Vzacharta ki eved hayita b’eretz mitzvryim*”, “Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt.” We remind ourselves over and over again during Passover and during the rest of the year of our history and suffering in Egypt. This memory becomes the foundation of our ethics as Jews. In Ex. 22:20, we are told “You shall not wrong a stranger, nor oppress him; *ki gerim heyitem b’eretz mitzvram*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Torah tells us that because of our history we have an obligation to reach out and help the orphan, the widow, and the stranger in our communities.

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Unfortunately, we don't need to go all the way back to Egypt to remember that we can be considered outcasts. Let's talk about Jews living in the United States in the twentieth century. For my grandparent's generation, there were quotas as to how many Jews could attend university. Malcolm Gladwell wrote an article called "Getting In" in 2005 for the New Yorker. He quotes sociologist Jerome Karabel's writing in "The Chosen" of how the meritocratic spirit of admittance soon led to a crisis at Harvard. "The enrollment of Jews began to rise dramatically. By 1922, they made up more than a fifth of Harvard's freshman class. The administration and alumni were up in arms. Jews were thought to be sickly and grasping, grade-grubbing and insular. They displaced the sons of wealthy Wasp alumni, which did not bode well for fund-raising. A. Lawrence Lowell, Harvard's president in the nineteen-twenties, stated flatly that too many Jews would destroy the school."³ As a result there were attempts at official and unofficial ways to limit the number of Jews at Harvard as well at other Ivy League schools.

Any college age students here today? Can you imagine that just because you happen to be Jewish that it would limit your ability to get into school? This was why a number of Jews tried to change their names to hide their Jewish origin. Oh there weren't just quotas in college. There were immigration quotas in our country. Yes, this was when Jews were trying to leave Nazi Germany and were turned back because Jews were undesirable even in the U.S. Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was interviewed for the TV series called "Jewish Americans" in 2008 where she recalled driving with her family into the country as a child. She will never forget seeing signs stating, "No Jews or dogs allowed." Even I have heard Jews who are in their seventies and eighties tell me that they were beaten up because they were Jews and they often hid their Jewish identities by tucking their Jewish stars under their shirts. We were strangers even in our country of America only decades ago.

Even today, there are still some anti-Semitic incidents. There was a TBD family that had to relocate out of state because of a mentally ill white supremacist was threatening their safety in

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Huntington Beach. However, these kinds of incidents are not the norm. Most of us feel quite secure in our neighborhoods, work, and communities. I hear continually from our teenagers how being Jewish in school is cool. Their peers marvel that they know some Hebrew, vie to eat their matzah during Passover, and are envious over their Bnei Mitzvah. Orange County, despite its history, is no longer a hostile place to be a Jew. In our nation today, overt anti-Semitism is a social taboo. It is no longer socially acceptable for any credible public figure to be anti-Semitic. We do not hear offensive comments from government officials or leaders. In looking at my own childhood, comparing it with my grandparents and our youth today, I have to admit that we as Jews have come a long way; we are no longer strangers living in a strange land. Our religion doesn't impede our ability to purchase a home, join a country club, attend university, be a professional, or even run as the vice president of America. As Jews, we are at home in America.

Even though we are no longer outcasts in the U.S, there are others who are looked at and treated as strangers in our country. Once Jews, Catholics, and those born in Japan were treated with suspicion, fear, bias, and even hostility. Today it is Muslims who are treated as outsiders. I'm not talking about Al Qaeda or the Taliban. I'm not speaking about those who rule Saudi Arabia or Iran. I am speaking about our fellow American citizens. Those who are living, working, going to school, and are legal citizens of the United States of America. Sadly, there are jokes, comments, and hurtful things that demonize everyone who is Muslim without distinction much the same way, my grandparents and great grandparent's generation were demonized in our own country decades ago.

For my January Megillah bulletin article, I interviewed my neighbor Shaheen, an American citizen whose religion is Islam. Interestingly when I have discussed religion with him, he speaks sort of like some of you. "He says he's not that religious", meaning, he feels guilty that he is not more observant. Shaheen and his wife came from Bangladesh during a time of turmoil. Pakistan sympathizers assassinated the head of his government and strove for greater relations with Libya and Saudi Arabia. Shaheen protested along with others against this newer more

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extreme government. When he learned his name was on a list of people to be killed, he came the US. There were challenges for him. In Bangladesh, Shaheen had a master's degree in chemistry and was a practicing chemist. Coming to the US, he couldn't go back to school because he had to earn money to support his wife and their three year old son, so he went into business instead. Working hard, he and his wife have instilled the importance of education in his sons. His oldest just finished college is looking into graduate school. His younger sons are both in GATE programs at school.

Despite Shaheen being an American, a hard worker, and one who is raising a contentious family, he still has had hateful things said to him. Shaheen described to me that this year a postal worker told him that he hated all Muslims and wanted to kill them. Shaheen told him, "You want to kill me?" I'm a Muslim." The postal worker replied, "I thought you were Indian, no, you are nice guy." Shaheen has had people tell him, "Why are you here? Go back home." Despite these comments, Shaheen believes that most people in the US are reasonable and not racist.

Americans whose faith is Islam have been portrayed as the strangers, those who must be feared. This past spring, I along with the Board of Rabbis met with Elie Weisel, Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, at Chapman University. I asked him about perceptions of Muslims in America. He responded, not surprisingly, that even though we must combat terrorism and defend ourselves, we cannot afford the demonization of an entire group of people. I'd like to add as Jews, we know what it is like to be accused of ruling the world, controlling the World Bank, running Hollywood, and more. Just because we are Jews doesn't make us all Bernie Madoffs. It is because of our enslavement in Egypt, because of our thousands of years of persecution, because of the inequity we have faced in America, we have to be more sensitive to the outsiders today. *Ki gerim heyitem b'erezt mitzvram*. We must remember that we were once strangers in the land Egypt.

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Welcoming the stranger, of course, isn't just about religious tolerance. It's about how we treat people at all times and places. When we are at school are there any kids who are strangers, i.e., those who were new to school? Are there kids with physical or learning challenges? Are there youth who are lonely? We should be like Abraham and Sarah and welcome them. In places of work, is there someone who is a bit of a loner or doesn't fit in? Perhaps we should consider inviting them to lunch, to work on a project, or even to a celebration or social outing. In our synagogue, there are so many people here during our High Holy Days, we all feel like strangers. It's hard to know who is new, visiting, or a long time member. After our service, take a moment and introduce yourself. Turn to someone in front or behind you and let them know your name, if you are a visitor, or how many years you have been a member of TBD.

As Jews, we have a long memory. Our suffering under Pharaoh and experience of discrimination even in America, remind us to extend empathy and tolerance to others. When we welcome strangers into our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and workplace we are practicing *hachanast orchim* just like Abraham and Sarah did that hot day in the sun. When we help others feel wanted and valued, we treat people like my grandparents Elsie and Saul did. May our past experience as a people help to remind and inspire us to be tolerant, understanding, and welcoming. So that in time there will no longer be strangers in our communities but rather just friends.

Notes:

¹ Rashi on Gen.18:1

² Deut. 15:15

³ http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/10/051010crat_atlarge#ixzz1V2TtqUjV